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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

DEPARTMENT OF DECORATIVE ARTS

Bremgarten Room

1920

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EUROPEAN DECORATIVE ARTS

Bremgarten Room

Department of European Decorative Arts Gallery Guide no. 4

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Bremgarten Room.

The room consists of the interior woodwork of a small apartment, of the sixteenth century, from a house in the village of Bremgarten, in the Canton of Aargau, a few miles west of Zurich. Other rooms from the same village are preserved in the Landesmuseum at Zurich. In general character the room is not unlike several in the Dürer house at Nuremberg, built about the same time.

The wood used in the construction of the room and for the furniture seems to be fir, not unlike our soft pine in its grain and quality. The door and the corner-post on which it hangs alone are of oak. The small moulded beams which divide the panelling of the slightly arched ceiling are each carved in the middle with a five-petalled rosette, and at the ends with an intaglio pattern like the tracery of a Gothic window surmounted by a large finial in relief. The ceiling being slightly arched, the end girders, or plates, on which these moulded beams rest originally had the form of a small segment of a circle. The plate over the door retains its original form and is elaborately carved above with a heavy, dentated moulding and below with a vine pattern in high relief. Over the windows only the heavy, dentated moulding remains, bordered below with

an elaborate frieze of leafage.

The chests, chairs and tables in the room are also ornamented with floral and scroll designs in the flat, Gothic carving common on Swiss woodwork of the late fifteenth century. French and North Italian chests are found occasionally carved in the same manner, but usually with figures instead of scroll-work and floral designs. The chests in the room were intended to contain clothes, linen or any other objects of value. One can imagine the Swiss housewife carefully guarding - perhaps often wearing at her side - the huge keys which fit these locks. The tables serve an additional purpose. Beneath their hinged tops are several compartments, taking the place of the drawers in later tables. No nails are used in their construction, only wooden pegs and wedges, and the top of one is made from a single plank. The two folding arm-chairs and two slatted chairs are part of the original furniture of the room. They are also put together with pegs, and the larger arm-chair is very similar to an Italian chair in the Gothic Room in the Huntington Avenue wing of the building. The cupboard, which is somewhat later in date, is of very simple form, with upper and lower doors. There were no built-in closets in the houses of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In fact,

closets are very modern conveniences and largely confined to America.

The seventeenth century pottery stove is built of green lead-glazed tiles with relief designs copied from those of the fifteenth century and representing the Madonna and Saints. Stoves of this type were for heating and not for cooking purposes. A small fire built on the hearth below, and soon burnt out, gave up all its heat to the tiles which radiated it into the room for hours after. In the eighteenth century these stoves were more elaborate in design and sometimes were provided with seats at the sides. The floor-tiles are modern, but are similar to those often found in rooms of this type.

The bull's-eyes and painted glass in the windows are of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (partly restored). The old painted glass is not a part of the original room. The panels have been added in accordance with the custom to let into the center of plain leaded glass small painted medallions representing escutcheons. The medallion with the lions and that bearing a shield with the double eagle over the date 1618 are the best in workmanship. The latter gives an interesting study of the gorgeous costumes of slashed silk and velvet and of the beautifully engraved and gilded

armor worn in the early seventeenth century.

The remaining objects in the room are the following:

A brightly painted Dutch cabinet and stand near the door. It comes from Friesland and is dated 1770. On the front are represented the Nativity and Circumcision; on the sides other biblical subjects, and on the top scrolls, birds, animals and other forms.

Hanging over this cabinet is an eighteenth century brass warming-pan with an iron handle instead of the wooden one more usually found. These pans were filled with hot coals and passed between the sheets of a bed - a custom well-known in colonial America and common also all over Europe. In Pieter de Hooch's painting, "Maternal Care", in the Rijks Museum, Amsterdam, the mate to this pan is seen hanging on the wall beside the bed.

The large pewter tankard on the table is German and bears the date 1745, with the arms and initials of the Cavalry Guild for which it was probably made. The cover is surmounted by the figure of a Hussar holding a wine-cup. The small faucet on the front is a later addition.

The brown stoneware jug standing on the chest at the right, the large plate with "I. H. S." in

the center, and the plate near the door mottled in yellow and green are German of the eighteenth century. The medallions on the jug contain stamped coats-of-arms. The brown plate is decorated in "slip" or liquid white clay instead of paint. The mottled paint is glazed with a lead oxide, which in certain lights gives an effect of iridescence.

Over the chest is another curious plate with the representation of the Nativity and the date 1787. The figures are in almost full relief, very crudely modelled and colored, but typical of the common Dutch pottery of the late eighteenth century.

On the opposite wall a large plate is incised with the figure of a horseman wearing a plumed hat and curled wig. It is dated 1749 and has an inscription in Dutch. Pottery of a similar kind was made by the Dutch potters in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

On the chest nearby is a Friesland sled carved and painted with figures and scroll patterns. The high relief on the back represents Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The queen kneels before the monarch enthroned in his palace, while her attendant follows carrying a basket on her head. Lying on the sled are the two iron-shod sticks used to propel it.